

Sally Hammel: Good morning. Welcome to morning prayers. Will you please stand as you're able and join me in reading Psalm 25 in the black African Psalter, responsive reading? To you, oh God, I lift up my soul. My God, I put my trust in you. Let me not be humiliated nor let my enemies triumph over me.

Congregation: Let none who look to you be put to shame. Let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.

Sally Hammel: Show me your ways, oh God, and teach me your paths.

Congregation: Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation. In you have I trusted all day long.

Sally Hammel: Remember, oh God, your compassion and love for they are from everlasting.

Congregation: Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions. Remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness, Oh God.

Sally Hammel: Gracious and upright are you, therefore you teach sinners in your way.

Congregation: You guide the humble in doing right and teach your ways to the lowly.

Sally Hammel: All your paths are love and faithfulness to those who keep your covenant and your testimonies.

Congregation: Let integrity and uprightness preserve me, for my hope has been in you.

Choir: (Singing)

Nazneen Cooper: Good morning.

Congregation: Good morning.

Nazneen Cooper: My talk today is about hands. Oh Zarathushtra, the fire that cooks our daily meals sends to us a message of guidance in return for our offerings. It beholdeth the hands of the devotee and sayeth, "What doth the fire that glows within thee bring for the fire seated in front of thee?" This is from the Khūrda Avesta, the sacred text of the Zoroastrian faith. Hands are not mere limbs, ordinary and functional, but they shape and embody our interactions with the world around us. This passage reminds us that in prayer we hold our hands upwards towards the heavens as a conduit between the Almighty's blessings and us. Sometimes the hands are closed in prayer, humble to greater powers. Other times we hold them open to receive what the world generously bestows. We use our hands to express these feelings of gratitude and devotion.

Nazneen Cooper: We use our hands to express ourselves often using them as we speak. Hands also create. Hands have created the wonders of the world in architecture, sculpture, paintings, artifacts of quotidian life, our food, our clothing. I have used my hands to design buildings and landscapes, to make habitable, hostile terrain and enhance beauty. Most recently, in partnership with the undergraduate Green Think Team, we created the rain gardens using our hands to shape and order the landscape. Some of us work the land to produce food to feed others. We cook food for our families and for ourselves. This is one of the greatest acts of love. Cooking for those you care about, but also preparing your own food as a form of self care. Soup kitchens rely on the compassion and generosity of human hands as they prepare food for others.

Nazneen Cooper: Michelangelo transformed a cold white slab of marble into the flowing soft Pietà. With his hands, he sculpted Mary's expression of agony, solemnity, resignation, tenderness, and loss all at once. She lovingly cradles the fragile limp body of Christ in one arm and hand while her other hand rests palm up as if in prayer. The creases, folds and flow of her garments supplant the cold hard qualities of marble, which becomes soft and pliable in the hands of this great sculptor. In his extraordinary paintings at the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's centerpiece is the creation of Adam. Here the finger signifies life force as God reaches out to touch the hand of Adam or as a conduit to which God transmits knowledge as the hand that writes the 10 commandments. It is through the hand that intelligence, ideas, morality are transmitted to us. Hands make music, complete the movements of dancers as they execute choreography and sometimes tell stories without words. The writer uses his hands as an instrumental record of thoughts, ideas, history, and tell tales of wonder.

Nazneen Cooper: But most importantly, hands convey a human touch whereby without words we are able to connect with people from different cultures and places. Connect with the flora and the fauna which surrounds us so that through this tactile medium we realize that we are alive. Our hands and body love, friendship, fidelity, acceptance and gratitude. The handshake conveys welcome, and the extension of a comforting hand reminds us that human touch is fundamental to human bonding. We reach out hands as we console a friend or to hold up someone as they stumble through life's ups and downs. Often we clap them together in jubilation and exhilaration, recognizing achievement and success.

Nazneen Cooper: I end with a short excerpt written by my daughter some years ago, which inspired today's talk. Above all these free independent hands love the feel of the wind passing through them like dry water. They'd love to swing purposefully as I navigate the people choked passageways of my school. These hands are comfortable, unbound and unconnected by my sides, but they also fight against the precept that teenage hands cannot hold their mother's hands in public. I surprise... I suppress the awkward, self-conscious teenager part of my brain as I reach for my mother's hand. These hands, these creative, hardworking, affection, hands understand that human connection brings the greatest joy in life.

Nazneen Cooper: I end by saying, look at your hands, the hands of your neighbor, your friends, and love these hands because they create, give form to ideas, connect and bring people together. Thank you.

Sally Hammel: Let us pray. God, use our hands to bless others. May we like you become sources of blessing, strength, and encouragement as we touch the lives of those around us. In your name we pray. Please join me in saying the Lord's prayer on the back of your order of worship. Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen. And now please stand as you're able to join us in singing, "Father Of All, We Lift To Thee Our Praise." Hymn number 350 in your crimson hymnal. Number 350.

Congregation: (Singing)

Sally Hammel: It's Wednesday. Please join us downstairs for mem-cafe. And with that, go in peace to love and serve the Lord.